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Every spring after shearing and the cow work, I have a set pattern. The first weekend is spent visiting my siblings in Austin, followed by spending the rest of the week on the coast at my son and daughter-in-law's beach house at Port Aransas, followed by a return through Austin to wind up the trip.

Austin abounds in music and plays; the foggy, damp coast is a tremendous change from the desert climate of the shortgrass country. Packing for the two destinations isn't a problem. All the youth and diversity of the University crowd in the city makes dressing as a sea captain or beachcomber as fashionable on Congress Avenue as wearing the same costume might be on the Gulf.

Hard to stand out in any kind of clothes around Austin. Tattooed ladies check groceries, decorated in purple barbed wire strands etched around their waists with green spider webs drawn over their shoulders, and necklines exposed by orange hair. Mullet-headed boys slouch by, wearing black baseball caps backwards and flashing gold bobs sticking in their nostrils. Lap dogs are groomed to look like huskies, and tomcats have dyed whiskers. At stoplights, music booms strong enough to shake the latches on the sunroofs of the small red cars and white Corvettes.

Sad part of the story is that this free-spirited city grows by 70 persons every day. Interstate Highway 35 passing north and south through town stays snarled and overcrowded.

Motorists as old as their late 20s are yet to find their first vacant parking place downtown, or in the University area during the daylight hours. Ten p.m. was the earliest reservation available in my favorite restaurants. Worse, the awful truth was that if I stayed on the coast seven nights, 490 new people were going to vie for the same amount of tables, and cause dinner to fall after 11 o'clock.

On the second lap of the trip, two of my sons used their influence to reserve a table in Sullivan's, a relatively new steak house down in the old warehouse district. The same outfit, I understand, owns a similar restaurant in Dallas. The manager told us the meat is Angus beef from a packer in Kansas. In Dallas, the beef is aged for 21 to 26 days, then shipped and cut at the kitchen in Austin.

So many culinary frauds called steaks have passed in front of my eyes in the past 20 years, I was unable to peg the grade of Sullivan's meat. The marbling made number one choice a safe guess, yet the tenderness made prime a possibility. The aging accounted for part of the superb flavor. We surmised the chefs used separate grills to cook the thick steaks to different degrees of rareness. (The major franchise places hire retired shoe cobblers to cut and trim their steaks.)

Side dishes equaled the quality of the meat, or the ones I ate did. The house salad is one quarter of a head of chilled, crisp iceberg lettuce, dressed in Roquefort cheese

coated so the cheese sticks to the slope of the leaves to drop to a delicate pool of light vinaigrette. Crab cakes are fresh meat only slightly coated in batter. Quite a contrast to the big blobs of deep-fried, flour-coated croquette kind of canned grease balls that some joints have the audacity to claim are "Maryland Crab Cakes."

At the time, the place was too noisy to praise or comment on the food. I became so possessive of the 12-ounce filet on my plate, I found myself holding the cut down with the flat side of my knife blade while taking a bite and watching the moves of the other diners. Next to us, two young couples sat at a table for two by the girls sitting in the boys' laps. The girls were wearing mini skirts, or better, were covered by an abbreviated version of a mini wrap, or an oversized lap hankie. The briefness of the hemlines exaggerated the length of their hindlegs to gazelle-like proportions, which seemed to caused them to swing their legs to the same rhythm they were chewing gum. Would have taken my mother about 25 seconds to verbally overhaul that kind of display in public.

Austin isn't the only town experiencing a population explosion. Sixty-seven new people have moved into our county in the past seven years. Mertzon is growing, too. While I was gone, Jim Ed Basham and his wife moved into Mertzon from the old Bar S ranch. However, the shift in population may not change the size of the county, as the line camp where they lived might be on this side of the line. But no more

extra room than they'll want after living on a 275-section ranch, I don't think they'll put a strain on the seating at the local restaurants ...